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Office of Program Resources Management

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February 20, 2008

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NEWS HEADLINES

US envoy Kenney, MILF chief Murad meet on peace process

By Jason Gutierrez

Agence France-Presse

(Source: Philippine Daily Inquirer News Online – 2/20/08)



QUEST FOR PEACE. US Ambassador Kristie Kenney and MILF chairman Al Haj Murad emerge from a close-door meeting in Camp Darapanan in Sultan Kudarat, Shariff Kabunsuan Tuesday at which they discussed ways to resume stalled peace talks between the secessionist group and the government. PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER/EDWIN FERNANDEZ / INQUIRER MINDANAO BUREAU

CAMP DARAPANAN, Philippines -- (UPDATE) US ambassador Kristie Kenney on Tuesday met with the head of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in an attempt to restart stalled peace talks, the two sides said.

Although Washington has sent representatives to meet the MILF in the past, Kenney is the first American ambassador to meet with leaders of the secessionist rebels.

Accompanied by US security personnel and aid officials, the envoy visited the main rebel base of Camp Darapanan and met with MILF chairman Murad Ebrahim and members of the group's central committee.

However, Kenney said it was a "private visit" and would not comment further.

Murad told Agence France-Presse (AFP) after the meeting that Kenney had questioned him about the status of the peace talks, which he said would resume next month.

"There was high hope on the part of the US envoy that the talks will succeed," he said separately.

But he declined to give more details of the meeting or whether the Balikatan exercises, which will be conducted in some MILF-influenced areas until March 13, was discussed.

"I cannot say anything more, I'm sorry," Murad said. When pressed to describe the meeting, Murad described it as very cordial.

"We welcome her efforts to reach us in the name of peace," Murad said.

He said Kenney's visit was a "good gesture and would surely help improve the stalled talks."

A member of the MILF central committee, who was present at the meeting, said Kenney reiterated Washington's support for the peace process.

"That's the reason why I personally came over," the source, speaking on condition of anonymity, quoted Kenney as telling the MILF leadership.

The source said Kenney also pledged more help for war-torn areas in Mindanao through the implementation of development projects.

"She said peace in Mindanao is for the benefit of everybody, not only the Bangsamoro people but the international community as well," he said.

Aside from Kenney, Deputy Ambassador Paul Jones and four officials of the United States Aid for International Development (USAID) also came.

Washington has pledged tens of millions of dollars in aid to the troubled Mindanao region of the southern Philippines once Manila strikes a peace treaty with the 12,000-member MILF.

Concerned with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Southeast Asia and the previous use of MILF training camps by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) militants, the US government is also providing military training and intelligence to Filipino forces in Mindanao.

The visit came as the Philippine military announced it has exhumed in the nearby Tawi-Tawi island group what it believes could be the remains of key JI suspect Dulmatin, a principal suspect in the 2002 Bali bombings that killed more than 200 people.

"We are on track. We are negotiating now so we can achieve the aspirations of the (Filipino Muslims). We are trying very hard to get the peace agreement that we want," Murad told AFP.

Representatives of the MILF and President Gloria Arroyo's government met earlier this year to discuss the talks, which are hosted by Malaysia, he said.

"We are just discussing some issues now and we are returning to the peace table in March," he added.

Kenney was greeted by MILF fighters in combat uniform and armed with M16 rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. She met with Murad behind closed doors for about an hour before departing.

"We have to build peace on the ground first while negotiating," Murad said, adding that the US Agency for International Development "is helping us in building this aspect of the peace process."

MILF officials told AFP that Kenney asked the MILF to support annual joint military exercises between US and Filipino troops. This year's maneuvers began in several areas of Mindanao on Monday.

Michael Mastura, member of MILF peace panel, said negotiations with the Philippine government were back on schedule but said there were some "obstacles relating to the ancestral domain issue."

"We would have to see whether we can reach a political settlement on the ancestral domain issue," he added.

The completion of a final peace agreement between the government and the MILF hit a snag in December due to disagreements over the issue of "ancestral

domains" or government recognition of areas where the country's Muslim minority would have some control.

The MILF has been waging a bloody rebellion in the mineral-rich Mindanao island since 1978, but signed a truce with Manila in 2003 paving the way for peace talks.

Several thousand US troops began arriving in the southern Philippines on Monday to take part in the annual military exercises with the Philippines.

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